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BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

The Nonpartisan League. By HERBERT E. GASTON. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920. Pp. vii+325. \$1.75.

In this gracefully written and very readable book Gaston has given us an intimate picture of his friend, A. C. Townley. It is the story of Townley, and, being the story of this one man is, in fact, the story of the Nonpartisan League movement which is now in control of the state government of North Dakota and is a political force in twelve adjoining states. Hence the title of the book is appropriate. Only this subtitle should be added, "The Good Farmer's Fight against the Bad Business Man."

Gaston frankly warns us at the outset that he was for three years on the League's editorial staff and writes from a "sympathetic standpoint." His interpretation of his patron's words and deeds are thus colored in two ways—by his very real admiration for Townley and by his own economic philosophy of life. Gaston's philosophy is a Marxian economic determinism, and is thus expressed in his own words: "The conditions of production and distribution of the things people want to consume must inevitably shape political history and political institutions" (p. 319). His regard for Townley as a prophet may indeed be carried too far, for after reciting the bitter opposition to Townley, he concludes, "They stoned the prophets and they crucified Christ. Human nature does not change much" (p. 324). However, there is no doubt in the writer's mind that Gaston has made a sincere and honest effort to tell the truth.

This book is the first complete, connected statement of the origin and growth of the Nonpartisan League by one who was familiar with the facts. A severe critic will find in it much to praise, little to blame. Of course certain transactions are glossed over: such as the method of acquiring the *Daily Courier's News* from a League enemy; the somewhat Prussian-like Liar Law enacted to curb the activities of three state officials who turned against the League; and the first so-called "State Convention" held by the League. All important events are given "with bright protective coloration." An unduly large part of the book is devoted to explaining and defending Townley's war record. It

needed explaining. But since the war is over, it seems to the reviewer best to let the matter rest in peace.

Townley was once a Socialist, later a Nonpartisan Leaguer; he is all the time an opportunist. His only fixed philosophy seems to be a hatred of "Big Business." In this he is doubtless sincere. This explains his passion and his fire, long sustained, in carrying out, from 1915 to 1920, the big League organization until it now has 200,000 members paying annual dues of \$9.00 each. It is a "class conscious" movement (p. 73), and depends for its success on poisoning the relations of farmers to all other classes save the "labor class." The interesting effort is made to reconcile the interests of the farmer and the city laborer.

While the book has historical sequence, it lacks philosophical unity. The three outstanding things which have most impressed the writer are these: (1) the relation of town and country; (2) the problem of rule by one man versus rule by "the people"; (3) the "evils" in North Dakota and the "remedy" applied by the League. Consider each of these three in turn.

(1) The bankers are referred to as "conscienceless usurers and mortgage sharks" (p. 51). The farmers, says Gaston, "had followed the trail of their grievances from the farm to the town, with its small elevator, its group of little shacks, its marble bank . . . and on to the city . . . with its princes of industry" (p. 55). Townley said little to the farmers "of high prices, of extortionate interest, or of any of the other direct grievances of the farmers against the town merchant. The burden of complaint was that the town business man had taken sides with the Chamber of Commerce monopolists and speculators and was helping them to loot the farmers through the sale of their products" (p. 113). Agriculture is "essential," says Gaston. Whereas all the activities of the towns and cities are merely a "service of supply" (p. 18). These excerpts need no further comment.

(2) The League's "expressed objects," says Gaston, "are to make government actually and fully responsive to the wishes of the 'common people' and to secure economic relief for exploited and oppressed classes" (pp. 3, 4).

But in carrying out this lofty purpose it was Townley's method to tell "the people" what they needed and then proceed on the theory that he was giving them what they wanted. First we see this in the secret legislative caucus, where all League measures were explained and adopted, and later voted for by all League members of the legislature. And back of the caucus we see the work in the League's headquarters

in St. Paul, Minnesota. By the way, what an irony of fate! The League was put in power partly, at least, to unhorse the "Old Gang" whose "boss," Alex McKenzie, used to nominate the state governors at a caucus at the Merchants Hotel in St. Paul! Enemies of the League now say a new "boss" is operating from St. Paul. Now, in the League's St. Paul headquarters a group of "experts" (not farmers) draw up "skeleton legislation on all the subjects embraced in the League program" (p. 288). These "experts" include one professor from Utah, one California Socialist, and some attorneys. This group are all Townley appointees. In the early days of the League, says Gaston, Charles Edward Russell was "a valued adviser" (p. 72). He was able to qualify as a League expert on agrarian problems.

Of course Townley was roundly criticized by enemies for being a "boss" and for his "one-man rule." Says Gaston, "It was Townley's fixed determination, made after mature deliberation, to keep the organization strictly in his own hands and the hands of the men whom he should select as his advisers until the 'idea' had been proved a success or failure" (p. 85).

"If," says Gaston in a later passage, "there was at all a serious weakness in Townley's system of promotion and government for his organization it was that there was too much Townley and not enough of division of authority in the affair" (p. 244).

The chapter on "League Democracy at work" leaves in the reader's mind the doubt whether this be "democracy."

(3) The least satisfactory, the least specific part of the book is that dealing with the "evils" and the "remedies."

"Economic abuses" are named on page 15, but not particularized. Later we read that the farmer is "exploited"; he pays "usury"; the townsmen "rob" him; he is pioneering under hard conditions of cold, isolation, drouth, rust, and so on. All these grievances are finally focused on the grain trade, since the state is largely a one-crop state. "Speculators" are mentioned (p. 50), and the "thefts and the injustices of the grain trade" (p. 42).

Gaston correctly describes a crying abuse of the grain trade "at an early day" (p. 19), namely, the monopoly of the country grain trade by the line elevator companies and the consequent price-fixing by a small group and the large margin taken on the farmer's grain. He also correctly states that the farmers' elevator movement (1900-1910) cured this evil. "When he has a local co-operative elevator in operation the farmer," says Gaston, "is fairly well assured that he can get for his

grain the going quotation in the big terminal market, less the handling and shipping costs" (p. 20). In falling back on the authority of an ex-president and a president of the State Agricultural College, however, Gaston is led into grave error as to "losses" in the present grain marketing system.

Gaston's discussion of the "luxury" of the life of the "speculators," of the evils of future trading, of the "grain board" that "controls the market" (p. 23), of the terminal elevator situation, of dockage, mixing, grading, weighing, of grain prices being always "low in the fall" when the farmer sells, and "high in the spring" (p. 28) when the farmer buys, represents the tenor of Townley's speeches on the grain trade, and the "educational matter" put out by him in the two League dailies and the one hundred and nine League weeklies. These "evils" are, since the farmers' elevators abolished the monopoly price-fixing, almost wholly imaginary. The League's new law on the grain trade and terminal elevator question had, according to Gaston "a wonderful effect" within a few months, resulting in "higher grading" and "less deduction of dockage" and "improved the prices paid" (p. 152). The wish is father to the thought here!

Gaston has given us a faithful report on the philosophy and deeds of his chief in organizing a new agrarian party with a platform of state socialism.

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The Casual Laborer and Other Essays. By CARLETON H. PARKER.
New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920. Pp. 199.

The collection consists of four papers on the labor problem, three of which had been previously published, with an introduction by Mrs. Parker.

The first paper apparently makes its initial appearance, but much of the subject-matter as well as the point of view was given in the *American Idyll*. It is an attempt to get the attitude of the psychologist with reference to the problem of labor unrest. His two postulates are: "That human life is dynamic, that change, movement, evolution are its basic characteristics." "That self expression and therefore freedom of choice and movement are prerequisites to a satisfying human state."

His conclusion is that "the problem of industrial labor is one of mal-adjustment between a fixed human nature and a carelessly ordered world." This inconsistency in his main contention regarding human